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Tadeusz Borowski and His Prose

by

© Helena Adamowicz

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Abstract

Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951) was somewhat of a legendary figure in the history of post-war Polish literature. Having endured many hardships throughout his youth, he began his literary career as a poet in Nazi-occupied Warsaw. He was arrested by the Gestapo in 1943 and imprisoned in Auschwitz for two years. In 1946 he returned to Warsaw to continue his writing, this time in prose. The stories Borowski wrote in the years 1946-1948 presented a harsh, realistic view of the Nazi concentration camp as well as Borowski's unique world-outlook. Between 1948 and 1951 Borowski became one of Poland's most ardent promoters of socialism. In his publicistic works from this period he continually attacked the capitalist West. In his short stories, he also expressed his faith in Marxism. However, he began to expose and criticise certain problems concerning people within the realm of socialism. In july, 1951, a totally disillusioned man, Tadeusz Borowski committed suicide.

This work provides Borowski's biography along with the analysis of his concentration camp stories, publicistic works and his later stories. It attempts to show the unity of Borowski's literary works and the logical progression and development of his thoughts throughout his life and literary career.

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I. Introduction

Tadeusz Borowski (1922-1951), poet, prose writer and publicist, passed into legend when he committed suicide at the age of 28. This man who had survived countless tragedies and hardships throughout his short life, including the Nazi concentration camps, killed himself and thereby made what appeared to be a final ironic statement to the world. This man, who had become famous for stories such as "This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen" telling of the era of gas chambers and crematoria, committed suicide by turning on a gas valve in his own apartment.

Both Borowski's life and his works have become legendary. This is probably due to the fact that the two simply cannot be dealt with separately. They must be looked at as two parts of a whole -- a whole which epitomizes the period of East European history from 1922 to 1951.

At first glance, the literary works of Tadeusz Borowski may seem rather fragmented and full of contradictions. It may seem as though his poetry had no connection with his prose and, within his prose, his concentration camp stories no connection with his later publicistic works and short stories. The purpose of this thesis is to show that this is not the case, particularly with regards to Borowski's prose.

If one carefully studies Borowski's biography and then reads his prose works in the order in which they were written, the logical progression and development of Borowski's thoughts as well as the unity of his works

becomes evident. This unity lies not only in the continuous stylistic threads running through them, but also in Borowski's philosophical attitude toward the world.

There are two major features uniting Borowski's prose. The first of these is the most important integrant of his literary technique, namely behaviourism. As the author, Borowski reserves his comments in the stories and, instead, he allows the behaviour (the words and actions) of the characters to express his thoughts.

The second feature concerns Borowski's aesthetics, the primary principle of which was something known in Polish literature as *turpizm* (the cult of ugliness). This type of aesthetics is concerned mainly with psychological and ethical criteria, usually in relation to some great moral conflict. *Turpizm* is also closely related to naturalism and behaviourism in that the features (usually negative) leading to this conflict are presented in a starkly realistic manner.[1] Although Borowski's *turpizm* is much more pronounced in his earlier prose, remnants of it remain through his publicistic works and in his later short stories.

Borowski's literary techniques as well as his aesthetics were closely related to his personal life -- a life which exemplified the tragedy of a moralist living in what he perceived to be an amoral world. Throughout his life Borowski searched for a system or ideology which would

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[1]See:Biernacka, Barbara, *Style i postawy* (Poznań:Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 1969), pp. 8-14; 244-249.

ensure a moral perfection (in the world). This search, in turn, left an indelible imprint on his works.

II. Biography

Z miasteczka do miasta
mknęliśmy z Julkiem samochodem
nie siedziałem jednak tyłem
lecz siedziałem przodem...

Mimo różnych przygód
siedliśmy do pociągu w Koziatynie
i tak bez zadnych wygód
do Moskwy nasz pociąg płynie.

W Niehorełom nas rewidowali
i tam myśmy obiad zjedli
po czym trocheśmy posiedzieli
i do pociąguśmy wsiedli...[2]

These are some excerpts from Tadeusz Borowski's first poem as recorded by his father in Baranowicze[3] on October 5, 1932. In this poem composed by the nine year old Tadeusz certain features very characteristic of his later works are already evident. There is a certain strength of style in the simplicity of expression, and a very vivid image is projected. Tadeusz, in this nascent effort, already seems to be attempting to conjure up the emotional atmosphere which typified so much of his later work -- namely gloom and uncertainty, perhaps even despair. Also typically, the topic of this poem is an event which affected his life -- an event in which he had taken part. It is this very important feature which makes it virtually impossible to analyze his works without taking into consideration his life or biography.

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[2]These excerpts published by: Małek, Felicja, "W 10-lecie śmierci Tadeusza Borowskiego," *Twórczość*, nr.8, 1961.
[3]The first train station in Poland after crossing the Polish-Soviet border.

Tadeusz Borowski was born on November 12, 1922 to Stanisław and Teofila Borowski who, at the time, were living in the city of Zhytomir (Soviet Ukraine). Although the major military turmoil in the area had ceased (the battles of World War I, the Bolshevik revolution, the Ukrainian civil war, the Polish-Soviet war), these were far from stable times. Indeed, the business of tying up loose ends from the various conflicts, to say nothing of revenge and retribution, continued for many years. In 1926, Tadeusz's father, who was working as a clerk at the time, was arrested for his involvement with the P.O.W. (Polish Military Organization)[4] during the First World War. He was sentenced to forced labor on the White Sea canal project in Karelia. Four years later Tadeusz's mother was also arrested and sent to a labor camp along the Yenisei River in Siberia. Tadeusz, then 8 years old, and his older brother, Juliusz, were left behind in Zhytomir. Juliusz was placed in a boarding school, while Tadeusz was put into the care of his aunt who lived in the nearby village of Marchlewski. While there Tadeusz attended the local Soviet school.

Thus scattered over the vast expanse of the Soviet Union, the Borowski family survived the following two years. The first prospects of a reunited Borowski family

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[4]The P.O.W. was organized in 1914 by Marshal Jozef Pilsudski. These troops were used primarily to create diversions by attacking Russian divisions from the rear during the battles of World War I. When Pilsudski staged his coup d'etat in May 1926, the former members of the organization who remained in the Soviet Union were arrested on the grounds that they were a threat to national security.

came into existence only in 1932 when Stanislaw Borowski was included in the exchange of political prisoners between Poland and the Soviet Union. In accordance with the terms of the agreement, a number of Polish prisoners were allowed to return to Poland in exchange for Communist prisoners being held there.[5] Once in Warsaw, Stanislaw Borowski, with the aid of the Red Cross, began the process of reuniting his family. By the beginning of October 1932, Tadeusz and his brother were on their way to Poland via Moscow. On October 5 they were greeted by their father at the train station in Baranowicze, Poland.

Stanisław Borowski took his two sons back to Warsaw where they were to settle. He found employment in Lilpop's factory and continued in his efforts to locate his wife and bring her to Poland. In the summer of 1934 Teofila Borowski was found and, again through the Red Cross, was reunited with her family in Warsaw.

However, this was the time of the Great Depression and the Borowski family found itself in the same dire financial situation as many other families. As a result, between the years 1934-1937 Tadeusz and his brother were enrolled in a boarding school run by the Franciscan Order so that they could receive a "good" education at minimal cost. It was there (in the Tadeusz Czacki *Gimnazjum*) that, under the

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[5]In 1932 the state of Polish-Soviet relations seemed to greatly improve and by July of that year Poland signed a non-agression pact with the Soviet Union . This improvement in relations made such prisoner exchanges possible.

influence of polonist prof. Stanisław Adamczewski, Tadeusz's historico-literary interests were sparked.[6] He would pursue these interests for the rest of his short life, even in times of the greatest adversity.

With the outbreak of World War II in September, 1939, Tadeusz, along with a friend, left Warsaw and set off for the East[7] with the vision of helping his countrymen in their struggle. However, he only reached as far as Łuck and by mid-October returned to his home in Warsaw where he decided to continue his studies. Since all but some of the elementary schools were officially closed down by order of the German General Government, he had to become involved with one of the underground schools which were operating under the most adverse conditions.[8] In the spring of 1940 Borowski took his final examinations and graduated from the *"Liceum Czackiego"*. (Some of the events which took place on the evening of those examinations are documented in his short story "Matura na Targowej".[9])

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[6]Drewnowski, Tadeusz, *Ucieczka z kamiennego świata* (Warszawa:PIW, 1977), p.36.

[7]In the mass confusion of September, 1939 there seemed to be a better chance of joining the Polish Army or the resistance forces (also engaged in battle with Soviet forces which had invaded Poland on September 17) in eastern Poland.

[8] The "General Government" incorporated the large area of Nazi-occupied central Poland and was considered a German colony. Most of the intellectuals in this area had been either executed or deported to concentration camps. Those who remained and decided to organize underground schools, held their classes whenever and wherever they could, meeting a few students at a time -- most often without access to textbooks.

[9]Borowski,T., "Matura na Targowej", *Utwory zebrane, t.2* (Warszawa:PIW, 1954). Henceforth: *Utwory, t.*

In the autumn of 1940 Borowski began his polonistic studies at the underground university in Warsaw, organized by the well-known literary scholar Julian Krzyżanowski. Also about this time he found employment (with the help of his brother) at the Pedzich Building Supply firm. In early 1942 Juliusz Borowski had to leave Warsaw, so Tadeusz took over his job as night watchman at the firm. This job allowed him to move out on his own, into the barracks attached to the firm -- #4 Skaryszewska street. This street, Borowski's room, the underground university and the events clustered around these "landmarks" emerge later in his stories such as "Pożegnanie z Marią" and "Profesorowie i studenci".

According to the accounts of some of the surviving students from the underground university, language in minute detail was to Borowski the most important factor in a literary work. He attacked every assignment with an almost passionate zeal and nearly every spare moment he had was spent with "book in hand". He was constantly reading, reciting or discussing some literary work, and he was also writing his own poetry (much of which was never published). While frequenting the gatherings of the university class he would sometimes introduce and recite his own poems as those of a "friend". Borowski was very sensitive to the opinions of others about his works and he was also (as are most self-conscious people) extremely self-critical.

One can appreciate therefore the strength and courage it took for Borowski when in December 1942 he mimeographed

165 copies of a collection of his own poems entitled *Gdziekolwiek ziemia....* He did this himself, by hand, on the same machine that was used by the Underground to print radio broadcasts, information bulletins and underground battle plans.[10] This was his poetical debut.[11] His was, however, the second such wartime debut, following Bugaj-Baczyński's which appeared in the summer of that year. Borowski's small volume of poems was rather poorly received by most of the literary community at the time.

This lack of acceptance was probably due to the uniqueness of Borowski's poetry. As with his later prose works, this volume stands in a class by itself. It did not easily fit in with contemporary works since it did not extol the glories of battle, nor did it lament the tragedies of war. It did not even speak of honour or the resistance movement. Instead it posed a rather disturbing question for all of humanity to answer -- or at least face: "What is the true meaning of civilization and culture, and do they really exist?" This forms the basis and starting point for all of Borowski's works.

In his poetry he poses the question and later, through his prose, he clarifies it while relentlessly searching for

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[10] The underground movement came into existance almost immediately after the invasion of Poland and soon grew into a widespread intricate network forming a true underground state with its own "Home Army".

[11] Since the publication of this volume of poetry was part of underground activities in occupied Poland, it is not considered as entirely "official". Borowski's official debut in Poland came in 1946 with the publication of his short stories.

a moral answer. Włodzimierz Maciąg sums this up as follows:

> In these poems a question is beginning to be posed, one which will later unfold and become the main nerve of his works, ...

He further adds:

> Poetry here is a symbol of the value of civilization, cultural achievements, the spiritual fruits of history. The catastrophe places their achievements in question. Between the interests of an artist and the reality of the Occupation there are no connections; one is fiction, whistful lies, the other -- the truth which is experienced daily. This motif shall continually return in the stories of this author. Reality was for him something else, something fundamentally different from that picture of the world and of man which was implied by the achievements of culture. [12]

The above mentioned features become evident when we look at some excerpts from the poems which were written in classical hexametrical form. For example, from the poem entitled "Obrazy snu":

> A kiedy wyrwany jęk ust lub ręki ruch niecierpliwy
> rozwieje w połowę sen i dekoracje zburzy --
> więc to jest przebudzenie? Oczom, spojrzenia niezwykłym
> ziemia porosła rośliną i wyłozona kamieniem
> i szare domy czynszowe, jakby sklejone z tektury i
> księżyc wycięty z papieru na sztucznym schyleniu nieba
> wszystko się wyda snem lub z płótna zdjętym obrazem.
> Ale już walki nie trzeba i bohaterstwa, i wiary
> w ziemię, w powietrzę i w kamień i można oddychać szeroko. ...
>
> Gdziekolwiek ziemia jest snem nie przebudzonym jeszcze,
> uwierzyć trzeba w kształt i kochać senny pozór,
> na wietrze budować mgłę i w pół nie urywać snu.
> Gziekolwiek ziemia jest snem, tam trzeba dośnić to końca. [13]

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[12] Maciąg, Włodzimierz, *Literatura Polski Ludowej, 1944-1964* (Warszawa: PIW, 1974), p.371.
[13] Borowski, T., "Obrazy snu", *Utwory, t.1* , p. 135.

In most of these poems Borowski presents us with an ominous, metaphysical sense of catastrophe. But this catastrophism is unlike any other to appear in Polish literature. As Drewnowski comments:

> But, the catastrophism of *Gdziekolwiek ziemia...*, even though lectures on poetry may have had some influence on it, cannot be identified with any other. Borowski's is a total catastrophism. ... *Gdziekolwiek ziemia ...*, poetry about the "land crumbling in the ether", is a farewell to romanticism, to youthful beliefs; it is a loss of faith in order and sense of purpose.[14]

To illustrate this point let us look at the first and last stanzas of the poem entitled "Piesn":

> Nad nami noc. W obliczu gwiazd
> ogłuchłych od bitewnych krzyków,
> jakiż zwycięzców przyszły czas
> i nas odpomni -- niewolników?
> .....
> Nad nami -- noc. Goreją gwiazdy,
> dławiący, trupi nieba fiolet.
> Zostanie po nas złom żelazny
> i głuchy, drwiący śmiech pokoleń.[15]

It was with copies of his own poems and Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*[16] that on February 25, 1943 Tadeusz Borowski was arrested by the Gestapo. He was in the apartment of Czesław and Maria Mankiewicz where his fiance, Maria Rundo, had been arrested two days earlier. Borowski was retracing her steps (trying to find her) when he fell into the trap set by the Gestapo. He was imprisoned in the Pawiak Prison[17]

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[14] Drewnowski, op. cit., p.54.
[15] Borowski, op. cit., p.125-126.
[16] Much of Borowski's early work is said to have been influenced by contemporary American authors such as Aldous Huxley.
[17] The Pawiak Prison was the site where prisoners were gathered and held before being transported to the concentration camps, usually Auschwitz.

on the edge of the Jewish ghetto in Warsaw, and was held there for just over two months before being transported to Auschwitz -- the infamous Nazi "death camp".

On Thursday April 29, 1943 Borowski arrived in Auschwitz -- just three weeks after the Nazis had officially stopped the extermination of non-Jews in the camps. By the Monday following his arrival, Borowski, prisoner no. 119198, was "doing hard labour" in a construction detail.

It is not known exactly when or how Borowski was admitted to the camp hospital during the fall of 1943, but once he had recovered from his illness, it was arranged for him to remain as night watchman for hospital block V. During this time Borowski continued to write his poetry. However, only a very small portion of what he wrote during this period survived the war to be published later.

In March, 1944 Borowski was allowed to take the "Medics Course" in order that he could become a regular camp *"fleger"* (medical orderly). Also that same spring, he finally managed to make contact , via letters, with his fiance who was imprisoned in the women's camp at Birkenau. These letters were later published as the short story "U nas w Auschwitzu". According to Drewnowski, these letters were the start of Borowski's switch to prose writing and in particular they were the starting point of his "concentration camp" stories. He states:

> "U nas w Auschwitzu" unquestionably constituted the beginning of Borowski's prose. Immediately, while still in Auschwitz, the first sketches of the view which Borowski's concentration camp prose presented, began to take shape. It was there that he consciously prepared himself for it.[18]

Later on in the spring of 1944, Borowski quit his job as medical orderly and volunteered for hard labour so that he could do construction work in the women's camp and meet with his fiance. However, in mid-August, 1944 he was evacuated from Auschwitz, first to the Dautmergen camp and then to another death camp -- Dachau. He lost track of his fiance for more than two years. She remained in Birkenau until January 18, 1945, after which she was transported to the women's camp in Ravensbrück, Austria.

On May 1, 1945 the concentration camps Dachau-Allach were liberated by the American 7th Army and the inmates were moved to a Displaced Persons' (D.P.) camp in Freiman, a suburb of Munich. Borowski stayed in the D.P. camp from May to September, 1945 and then moved to Munich proper to help organize and work in the *"Biuro Poszukiwania Rodzin"* (Family Location Bureau). This was an organization established to help people (particularly those who had survived the concentration camps) to locate relatives and friends they had lost track of during the war.

At the end of November, 1945 Borowski had another small volume of poems published in Munich by "Oficyna Warszawska na obczyznie". It was entitled *Imiona nurtu* and included some of the poems written in Auschwitz and Dachau, along

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[18]Drewnowski, op. cit., p.81.

with others written while he was in Freiman. Also by this time Borowski had started working with Janusz Nel Siedlecki and Krystyn Olszewski on a book about Auschwitz -- where all three of them had been imprisoned. This collection of short stories entitled *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu*, was also published in Munich in June, 1946. It included Borowski's first, and probably most controversial, prose works, "Proszę państwa do gazu", "Dzień na Hermenzach", "U nas w Auschwitzu" and "Ludzie, którzy szli". The first two of these stories were published in the Polish monthly *Twórczość* in April, 1946, about a month before Borowski returned to Warsaw.

Borowski's return to Poland (May 31, 1946) seemed to be more of an act of desperation than anything else. The year since the end of the war, was for him a period of great internal turmoil. A humanist who had lost faith in humanity and its ideologies, Borowski could not come to grips with post-war western European society, nor with his image of the new socialist society in Poland. He saw his salvation only in writing and giving voice to the "truth". However, he felt he had to do this in his native language and in his native land, and that is why he returned to Warsaw to continue his studies and his writing.

He resumed his studies at the University of Warsaw and was taken on as junior assistant by Prof. Julian Krzyżanowski. He also began working with a newly formed literary group, "Pokolenie", which published a periodical of the same name.

Politically, this group was relatively neutral by comparison with other groups formed immediately after the war, unlike the Catholic and somewhat right-wing groups centered around the weekly *Tygodnik Warszawski*, or the strongly socialist groups, for example, the major one centered around the periodical *Kuźnica*.

From September, 1946 Borowski also worked for the magazine entitled *Świat młodych* -- an illustrated journal for young people. In addition to all of this, he was preparing his own book -- a series of short stories.

In a letter to his fiance, in the fall of 1946, Borowski officially renounced poetry and decided to turn his talents to prose writing.[19] However, in this letter, and especially the ones which followed soon after, there were obvious signs that he was experiencing severe emotional turmoil and suffering from depression. The letters gave an eerie warning of how he would eventually meet his tragic end:

> Zrezygnowałem już zreszta z prób rozumienia tego, co się we mnie dzieje. Dominującym wrażeniem jest chyba wrażenie ogromnego zmęczenia sobą i apatii. Chciałoby się już od siebie odejść.[20]

In fear of what he might do, his fiance made immediate arrangements to return to Poland. She arrived on November 12, 1946 and was met by Borowski in Gdynia. Ironically, their first night together in liberated Poland was spent

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[19] ibid., p..146.
[20] Letter to Maria Rundo, Warsaw, October, 1946; published in Drewnowski, T., op. cit. p.146.

behind a barbed-wire fence, in quarantine at the repatriation camp. They were married on December 18 of that year.

Leading a very hectic life with all the work he had taken on with the university, literary groups, and with the periodicals, Borowski nevertheless continued his work on a book of short stories. However, the result was a book somewhat shorter than he had originally planned. Entitled *Pożegnanie z Marią* it contained the stories from *Byliśmy w Oświęcimiu*, three stories previously published in periodicals ("Chłopiec z Biblią", "Śmierć powstańca", and "Bitwa pod Grunwaldem") and only one new story: "Pożegnanie z Marią". Borowski finished work on the book in early summer of 1947 and it was published in late December. The public reaction to these stories, though much stronger than to his poetry, was not always favourable. Many Catholic critics screamed about the "immorality" of the material while the socialist critics screamed about its "nihilistic" undertones.

After finishing work on the book Borowski seemed to suffer a series of emotional crises and total mental exhaustion. At the end of June, 1947 he made his first suicide attempt, but was rescued by his wife. To some extent his emotional problems may have been caused by the stormy reaction to his works. He had begun to experience extreme self-doubt and started to question his strength and effectiveness as an author. At the same time he felt that if

he could not write, he had nothing to live for.

After this brief but terrible episode, Borowski seemed to recover quickly and he was soon back to work writing. His next project was a series of twenty very short stories which he originally titled "Wielkie zmęczenie". Although most of his closest friends and acquaintances tried to discourage him from continuing writing about the concentration camp and the war, this collection of stories seemed to continue the tradition of *Pożegnanie z Marią*. Despite the fact that almost everyone around him was busy trying to rebuild their lives and their country and were looking to the future, the war and the camp were still very much a part of Borowski's life. He felt he had not yet said all there was to say on the subject. This second collection of stories (*Kamienny Świat*, as it was later titled) was written not only as a continuation of *Pożegnanie z Marią* but partially in defence of it and himself. Drewnowski stated that:

> *Kamienny Świat* was written in defense of his own position, his own world-view and his own writing, which for Borowski literally meant -- his existence. Clearly it was a defense which was an attack.[21]

It was published and released in the last two weeks of December, 1948.

Although Borowski felt he could be a successful writer, on his own, without owing anything to Party membership, in February 1948 he had officially joined the P.P.R. (Polish

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[21] ibid., p.257.

Workers Party).[22] He did so more because of his own personal beliefs than because of external pressures (Stalinization and the strength and influence of the Party was being consolidated at this time -- in all spheres of Polish life). Thus, when he finished work on *Kamienny Świat*, he placed most of his time and talent at the disposal of the Party and so began the socialist phase of his literary career.

Continuing at a hectic pace, Borowski worked with writers' organizations and wrote stories as well as articles for numerous periodicals. Nevertheless a certain tension was building within him so that by mid-1949 he felt he had to get away from Warsaw -- desperately. In June the Party offered him a job as cultural reporter in the Polish Press Information Bureau in Berlin. He gladly accepted and moved there by the end of the month. His wife joined him in August.

While in Berlin, Borowski seemed to experience many changes. He seemed to greatly mature in the short time he was there. In his writing he began to move away from artistic prose toward publicistic work. The numerous articles and feuilletons he produced while in Berlin made him one of the Party's leading writers at the time and a political activist of great scale.[23] Some of his works from this period were published as a book titled *Opowiadania z książek i gazet*. This volume was released at the end of the

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[22]The P.P.R. later merged with the P.P.S. (Polish Socialist Party) to form the P.Z.P.R. (United Polish Workers Party).
[23] Drewnowski, op. cit., p.299.

year (1949). In July, 1950, four months after his return to Warsaw, Borowski received a literary award, the *Nagroda Państwowa III stopnia*, for this book -- a book which, most critics agree contained his weakest works.

Borowski, now an important Party member with his works being published and receiving critical acclaim, somehow felt stifled. He felt some concern that none of his works were on the list of those to be translated into other languages. In fact, he was beginning to feel that he was being tolerated more as a personality than honoured as a writer.

During the 15 months following his return from Berlin, Borowski continued to climb in the political hierarchy. He continued his publicistic work with even greater fervor than before, almost entirely abandoning artistic prose. He travelled extensively, speaking at various gatherings of authors and literary groups throughout Poland and Eastern Europe, and also made four trips back to Germany. However, the louder he proclaimed the official ideology, the less confidence he seemed to have in what he was promoting. Indeed he turned to satire, political satire in particular, and this seemed to interest him more and more.

At the end of February, 1951, Borowski again attempted suicide. Once again he was rescued. However, four months later, amidst rumours of his secret government missions in Germany and an affair with another woman, Borowski attempted suicide for the third and final time. On July 1, 1951, only three days after the birth of his daughter and while his

wife was still in the hospital, he opened a gas valve in his apartment and carried out the act. Despite rescue attempts he died two days later (July 3) in the Ministry of Health Hospital.

III. The "Concentration Camp" Stories

If we look at the early post-war Polish literary scene we may discover an element of diversity. A variety of periodicals were appearing on the market, each of them with a different social, political or even religious slant. Many of these would be published for a few months and then either merge with another or vanish completely from the scene. There was, as yet, no official policy or program concerning literature in the newly established socialist state. Therefore, many discussions among authors, critics and politicians were devoted to establishing some criteria or guidelines which would define acceptable socialist literature. In the meantime, authors were left to create their own methods.

Although many prominent authors of the Interwar period (for example: Iwaszkiewicz, Andrzejewski and Nałkowska) were resuming their careers after the war , the younger ones (those making their debuts, among whom were Borowski, Różewicz and Brandys) seemed to be moving quickly to the forefront and eclipsing their more experienced and established colleagues.

As one may well imagine, this early post-war literature was very strongly influenced by the horrors of the previous six years (1939-1945) which were still agonizingly vivid in everyones' minds. The majority of works published in Poland during the period 1945-1949 were, in one way or another, connected with the war and with death. Włodzimierz Maciąg,

in writing about the literature of this period (particularly about the works of the "young" authors) described the situation as follows:

> ... German fascism and the war -- these were phenomena so unusual and unexpected, so violent in their force, that they made it necessary for the author to reckon not only with history and its ideas, but also with mankind itself, with humanity and its civilizational achievements. Fascism involved man in new, revealing situations, unknown and unacceptable attributes of his nature , presented him in a different light, tore him from the shere of stipulated truths -- and thus, compelled literature to carry out a general revision of the concept: what is man? Bringing this catastrophe upon European culture, fascism brought into question the value of this culture, or rather, the value of civilization as created by mankind. The facts which constitute the illustrative material for this despondency were, of course, those occurances which exposed man's brutish and bestial traits, those occurances which told of the impermanence and impotence of human cultural habits. [24]

What Maciag was saying, in essence, was that the events of the war had made man painfully aware that all of his premises about the moral and philosophical foundations of humanity and civilization, in general, were now universally being doubted. This doubt resulted in the repeated review or restatement of the most fundamental humanistic questions. What was vainly being sought at this time (1945-1949) was truth, a stable reality and a general revision of the concept: "What is man, and more importantly, what is he capable of doing to his fellow man?" Literature had to respond to, as well as reflect the needs of society. Therefore, the works being published during this period,

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[24] Maciąg, Włodzimierz, *Literatura Polski Ludowej, 1944-1964* (Warszawa:PIW, 1974), pp.42-43. (trans. mine, H.A.)

both in poetry and prose, tended toward a style of objective realism similar in form to that of the Positivists but much more refined. In fact, many of these works were so realistic that they were on the borderline between literary prose and reportage. Many of them did, indeed, contain autobiographical elements.

As a talented writer living in these troubled times, Tadeusz Borowski extended the above mentioned trends to their literary limits. He did so in his first two volumes of short stories, *Pożegnanie z Marią* and *Kamienny Świat*. In reading these stories we immediately become aware of Borowski's firm belief in the need to tell the truth and to expose man for what he becomes in times of severe adversity (such as befell him during the war and, more specifically, in the concentration camp). His critical eye spared no one, not even himself. The stark realism of these stories does, indeed, make it difficult to distinguish them from documentary works. This is particularly true when we know that Borowski himself had spent two years as a prisoner in Auschwitz. In these respects Borowski's concentration camp stories fit very well within the framework of early post-war Polish literature. However, other distinctive features found in these two volumes isolate them into a group all of their own, not only within contemporary literature but also in relation to the rest of his own works.

Borowski's *Pożegnanie z Marią* and *Kamienny Świat* may be treated as a separate unit, or phase, within his total

literary devopment. The most obvious reason for this is their subject matter. Almost all of these stories are directly or indirectly connected with the war and the Nazi concentration camps. However, they also stand apart from his other works in their narrative style, tone and unique world-outlook (which shall be elaborated on later). These latter features are also what separated Borowski's concentration camp stories from the literature being published during the same period and even on the same subject. Czesław Miłosz made the following observations about Borowski's concentration camp stories:

> The treatment of the subject puzzled and even caused indignation among the critics. No such presentation of life in a concentration camp yet existed in literature, where there is no clear division into victims and criminals. The camp is shown as an infernal machine, forcing prisoners, its victims, into a struggle for survival at any price, be it at the expense of the weaker among them. All the notions of good and bad behaviour tumble down; "good" equals toughness and resourcefulness ; "evil" equals lack of cunning or of physical strength. The narrator, who bears the author's name (Tadeusz), is one of those tough fellows who organize their life in the camp quite well, steal, barter, know how to avoid overexertion while labouring, and look on with detachment, if not with a sarcastic grimace at the daily procession of thousands destined for the gas chambers. The moral ambiguity is emphasized by the tone of the narrative, which is a bragging one; connivance of the prisoners with their overseers is evoked in a matter-of-fact way. No overt moral judgement is passed. Borowski thus achieves an effect of cruelty which remains unsurpassed by any testimony on Nazi camps.[25]

Using Miłosz's statements as a starting point, we may now turn our attention more specifically to Borowski's

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[25]Miłosz, Czesław, *The History of Polish Literature* (New York:Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969), p. 489.

stories and expand on the ideas presented above. Firstly, we must look at Borowski's use of the first person narrator who bears his own name (Tadeusz), and in many ways may be considered his alter ego. This narrator not only links the stories in *Pożegnanie z Marią* and *Kamienny Świat* but he also links the two volumes to each other. It is through his eyes that we perceive the unique image of the concentration camp, not only the physical but the moral and philosophical aspects, and hence, we may piece together Borowski's world-outlook.

The primary function of the first person narrator in any piece of literature is to make the story believable, to make it come alive by bringing the reader "closer" to the action. This is especially true if, as in the case of Borowski's stories, this narrator is directly involved in the action and the story is written primarily in the present tense. By using this type of narrator Borowski reduced, almost entirely, the distance between the reader and the action of the story.[26] The reader, by following the narrator, is pulled into the center of the action and is, himself, almost forced to take on the role of participant in the events he is reading about.[27] This, in turn, gives the impression that the events are actually taking place as the story is read. Let us look, for example, at a fragment from

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[26] Palusińska, A., "O opowiadaniach obozowych Tadeusza Borowskiego" in *Prace polonistyczne*, seria XXI (Łódź: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolinskich, 1966), pp. 133-135.
[27] ibid., p. 135.

the story "Dzień na Hermenzach":

> Lecz cień kasztanów jest zielony i miękki. Nakryty cieniem siedzę w piasku i wielkim francuskim kluczem dokręcam złączenia wąskotorowej kolejki. Klucz jest chłodny i dobrze leży w dłoni. Co chwila biję nim o szyny. Metaliczny, surowy dzwięk rozchodzi się po całych Hermenzach i powraca z daleka niepodobnym echem. Oparci na łopatach stoją koło mnie Grecy. Ale ci ludzie z Salonik i winnych stoków Macedonii boją się cienia. Stoją więc w słońcu, zdjąwszy koszule i opalają niezmiernie chude barki i ramiona, pokryte świerzbem i wrzodami. [28]

Reading this passage gives us the impression that we have been placed right beside the narrator, in the center of this scene. We can almost sense the vibration of the wrench as it hits the metal railway track causing a ringing sound to reverberate throughout the camp. We also feel the narrator's disdain at the sight of the Greek prisoners who expose their boney, diseased bodies in the sunlight and we, too, begin to feel the same way towards them even though there is no specific mention of any type of judgement made.

Another important feature which brings the reader into the story is Borowski's extensive use of dialogue. The stories are unraveled primarily through the conversations which take place between the narrator (who is the main character) and the other characters in the stories. These conversations are carried out using much of the jargon specific to the concentration camp. For example:

> --Masz, zjedz, może to ci nareszcie zaszkodzi. W milczeniu chwyta miskę z rąk i zaczyna łapczywie jeść.
> --A miskę postaw koło siebie, żeby pipel pozbierał, bo dostaniesz od kapy w mordę. Drugą miskę oddaję

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[28] Borowski, *Utwory*, *t.2* , p. 51.

Andrzejowi. Przyniesie mi za to jabłek. Pracuje w sadzie.
--Rubin, co post mówił? -- pytam półgłosem, mijając go, aby pójść do cienia. [29]

Both of the above mentioned features are indicative of the principle elements of Borowski's aesthetics, behaviourism and *turpizm* (the cult of ugliness). In expressing his thoughts through the behaviour (actions and dialogues) of the characters, he tended to expose only the negative or "ugly" features of the scenes and characters he was describing. This, in turn, seemed to lead to the overall realism of Borowski's stories.

Because of the vivid descriptiveness and the severe reduction of "distance" between reader and story, Borowski's concentration camp works are very realistic, very believable. The narrator becomes a real, living person for the reader. But who, in fact, is he?

In writing these stories Borowski took upon himself an immense responsibility by allowing, or rather almost forcing, the reader to identify the narrator with the author -- Tadeusz Borowski. He gave the narrator his own first name and placed him in many of the same situations that he himself had been in; for example: clandestinely publishing his own poetry ("Pożegnanie z Marią": "...posłużył również do druku wzniośle metafizycznych heksametrów, wyrażających mój nieprzychylny stosunek..."[30]), detension in the Pawiak Prison ("Chłopiec z Biblią": "Na murze wznosiły się

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[29] ibid., p.69.
[30] ibid., p.29.

wieżyczki z karabinami maszynowymi. Dalej za murem leżały bezludne domy getta...[31]), imprisonment in Auschwitz, taking the medical orderly's course ("U nas w Auschwitzu": "... a więc jestem już na kursach sanitarnych."[32]), and living in the camps after their liberation by the American army ("Milczenie": "... do bloku wszedł młodziutki oficer amerykański w tekturowym hełmie na głowie i rozejrzał się przyjaźnie po pryczach i stołach." [33]).

This inclusion of actual autobiographical elements makes Borowski's stories much more authentic, authoritative and realistic, but one must bearin mind that these stories are, in fact, fiction and that the main character, Tadek, is also just that -- a character created by Borowski. This point was clarified in the introduction to his second volume of prose works (*Kamienny Świat*) where Borowski stated:

> Nie jestem pozytywnym katastrofistą, nie znałem kapy Kwaśniaka, nie jadłem mózgów ludzkich, nie mordowałem dzieci, nie siedziałem w bunkrze, nie chadzałem z Niemcami do opery, nie piłem wina w ogrodzie, nie oddaję się infantylnym marzeniom -- w ogóle byłoby mi bardzo przykro, gdyby opowiadania z *Kamiennego Świata* zostały potraktowane jako kartki z intymnego pamiętnika autora tylko dlatego, że są pisane w pierwszej osobie.[34]

If this was in fact the case and if Borowski's behaviour in the camp was very different from what he allows the reader to assume from Tadek's actions in the stories,[35]

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[31] ibid., p.44.
[32] ibid., p.1 .
[33] ibid., p.277.
[34] ibid., p.259.
[35] Miłosz, Czesław, *The Captive Mind* (London: Mercury Books, 1962), p.123.

why then did he employ such a narrator?

Czesław Miłosz said that Borowski:

> ...does not spare himself in his desire to observe soberly and impartially. He is afraid of lies; and it would be a lie to present himself as an observer who judged, when in reality he, though striving to preserve his integrity, felt subjected to all the laws of degradation.[36]

It is in this "desire to observe soberly and impartially" that lies the greatest strength of Borowski's concentration camp stories. Nowhere in these works does the narrator make a statement indicating a judgement, moral or otherwise. Rather than presenting black versus white contrasts between "good" and "evil" in the concentration camp, Borowski's differentiation may be described as that between varying shades of grey . Because of this "moral ambiguity"[37] and the way in which he made his stories so realistic and immediate (primarily through his use of the narrator), Borowski "forced" the reader to make the judgements. Borowski's technique, therefore, involved elliciting judgemental responses or feelings within his readers rather than explicitly stating his own views -- hence, this assured the realism of the stories. Indeed, this was also a very effective way for Borowski to present his philosophical views on the "world" within the concentration camps. Tadek, therefore, was created in order to serve as a specific medium for the conveyance of these views.

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[36] ibid., p.259.
[37] Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, op. cit., p.489.

The concepts which were presented in Borowski's concentration camp stories were unique in relation to contemporary Polish literature. What Borowski wanted to do in these stories was to expose the truth about man in the concentration camp situation. He had no use for the highly stylized martyrologies being published at the time (particularly by Catholic authors such as Zofia Kossak-Szczucka).[38] Borowski portrayed man as basically an animal whose strongest instinct was his will to survive. In fact, he completely rejected the idea of honourable death and martyrdom by seriously questioning all of these heretofore commonly accepted notions of civilization, humanity and human culture. Indeed, he perceived them to be farcical -- empty words and fantastic thoughts of an elite arbitrarily established long ago.

In a letter to his fiance[39] Borowski wrote:

> Pamietasz, jak lubiłem Platona. Dziś wiem, że kłamał. Bo w rzeczach ziemskich nie odbija się ideał, ale leży ciężka, krwawa praca człowieka. To myśmy budowali piramidy, rwali marmur na świątynie i kamienie na drogi imperialne, to myśmy wiosłowali na galeriach i ciągneli sochy, a oni pisali dialogi i dramaty, usprawiedliwiali ojczyznami swoje intrygi, walczyli o granice i demokracje. Myśmy byli brudni i umierali naprawdę. Oni byli estetyczni i dyskutowali na niby.

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[38]See: Borowski, "Alicja w krainie czarów",*Utwory, t.3* , p.21-31.

[39]It was in the letters to his fiance, written while he was still in Auschwitz, that Borowski established the philosophical basis, or sense, of his concentration camp stories. As was mentioned in the previous chapter, these letters were the preparation for, or the starting point of, his prose writing career and they were later published under the title "U nas w Auschwitzu".

> Nie ma piękna, jeśli w nim leży krzywda człowieka. Nie ma prawdy, która tę krzywdę pomija. Nie ma dobra, które na nią pozwala.[40]

In this passage Borowski rejected the entire concept of civilization -- ancient or modern. He perceived it as a grotesque lie. He saw the great civilizational achievements as being nothing more than the results of the "whims" of the stronger elite being carried out by (and at the expense of) the weaker elements of human society -- its slaves. There was, therefore, no beauty, no truth and no good in a system of civilization that would allow for the resultant horrendous atrocities against human life (not only in the past but in the present as well).

In fact, in the same letter Borowski compared the concentration camp situation to ancient times; the Nazis were a "new" elite who were building a "new" civilization:

> Zakładamy podwaliny jakiejś nowej, potwornej cywilizacji. Teraz dopiero poznałem cenę starożytności. Jaką potworną zbrodnią są piramidy egipskie, świątynie i greckie posągi! Ile krwi musiało spłynąć na rzymskie drogi, wały graniczne i budowlę miasta! Ta starożytność, która była olbrzymim koncentracyjnym obozem, gdzie niewolnikowi wypalano znak własności na czole i krzyżowano za ucieczkę. Ta starożytność, która była wielką zmową ludzi wolnych przeciw niewolnikom![41]

He feared that nothing would remain of the "previous" civilization, of the "slaves" in the concentration camp, if the Nazis were victorious and did eventually establish their new civilization -- a process continually repeated since the origins of written history or historiography about the time

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[40]Borowski, "U nas w Auschwitzu", *Utwory*, *t.2*, p.130.
[41]ibid.

of the ancient philosophers. They would simply cease to exist; they would be forgotten. There would be new philosophers, poets, lawyers and priests who would create new concepts of beauty, good, truth and even religion:

> I nikt o nas wiedzieć nie będzie. Zakrzyczą nas poeci, adwokaci, filozofie, księża. Stworzą piękno, dobro i prawdę. Stworzą religię.[42]

All this would be as dictated by the needs of the new elite and accepted by the rest of society.

It was Borowski's premise, therefore, that if this was possible, if the concepts of civilization and culture could be altered at any time by a relatively small group of people who had managed, somehow, to overpower the rest, then everything boils down to the fact that "the strong survive and the weak perish". Hence, there is no difference between man and the other animals. This therefore was Borowski's pragmatic, pessimistic existentialism.

While the letters cited above provide the philosophical background, or basis, of Borowski's concentration camp stories, the other works describe the situations and events which give support to these views. Let us now look at a few passages from these stories.

The story "Proszę państwa do gazu" is probably the best known and most often cited of all Borowski's works. It is also the most representative of his concentration camp stories since it seems to outline most of the views he wished to present.

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[42] ibid., p.131.

Borowski opened the story with the statement:

Cały obóz chodził nago. [43]

In saying this he was not simply referring to the people being "naked" in the physical sense (as a result of the delousing process) but rather, to the idea of mankind being "naked" or unmasked in a philosophical sense. In the concentration camp situation Borowski perceived mankind to be stripped of all the concepts of civilized behaviour. He "saw the camp as a place where a total demystification of life takes place, where all the lies are removed from our views about man and his true nature . He saw it as a type of mirror in which mankind could take a close look at itself.[44]

Throughout the rest of the story Borowski developed this theme by showing how the basic concepts of civilization had been rejected in this situation. Firstly, he discounted the notions of good and evil by blurring the differences between victim and criminal. In this story (as in the others) Tadek was a prisoner in Auschwitz. This would normally imply that he was a victim and that the Nazis were the criminals. However, things not being so simple Tadek is also one of the stronger, more cunning prisoners who managed to live relatively well in the camp. He did so at the expense of other weaker, less fortunate prisoners -- and at the expense of those who died:

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[43]Borowski, "Proszę państwa do gazu", *Utwory, t.2*, p.80.
[44]Maciąg, op. cit. ,p. 373. (trans. mine)

> ...ludzi nie może zabraknąć, bobyśmy pozdychali na lagrze. Wszyscy żyjemy z tego, co oni przywiozą.[45]

In spite of this, however, Tadek is not presented as an entirely unsympathetic character. In fact, he is neither good nor bad; he is simply there and his behaviour is to be considered "normal" -- indeed practical or pragmatic. For example, when Tadek asks a fellow prisoner if they are "good" people:

> --Słuchaj, Henri, czy my jesteśmy ludzie dobrzy?
> --Czemu się głupio pytasz?
> --Widzisz, przyjacielu, wzbiera we mnie zupełnie niezrozumiała złość na tych ludzi, że przez nich muszę tu być. Nie współczuje im wcale, że idą do gazu. Żeby się ziemia pod nimi wszystkimi rozstąpiła. Rzuciłbym się na nich z pięściami. Przecież to jest patalogiczne chyba, nie mogę zrozumieć.
> --Och, wprost przeciwnie, to normalne, przewidziane i obliczone. Męczy cię rampa; buntujesz się, a złość najłatwiej wyładować na słabszym. Pożądane jest nawet, abyś ją wyładował.[46]

In this passage we also see how Borowski had rejected the psychological or philosophical aspects of life in the concentration camp by reducing everything to a matter of physiological imperative -- survival. Tadek's reaction to those destined for the gas chambers was explained away in terms of physiological cause and effect as tempered or affected by deflected (rather than repressed) anger -- the destructive impulse[47] -- and therefore, it was completely "normal" in such a situation.

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[45] Borowski, op. cit., p. 81-82.
[46] ibid., p.91-92.
[47] See: Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (London: The Hogarht Press, 1975), pp.48-49; 74-75; 79-80.

In connection with this Borowski also negated the notions of justice, friendship and even religion. He saw these as concepts created by man and changed along with his situations. In the camp a "new" type of justice prevailed and true friendship did not exist:

> W obozie panuje zawistna sprawiedliwość: gdy możny upadnie, przyjaciele starają się, by upadł jak najniżej.[48]

Religious faith in the camp was a hindrance:

> Religia jest opium narodu. ... Gdyby oni nie wierzyli w Boga i w życie pozagrobowe, już by dawno rozwalili krematoria.[49]

He viewed religion, again, as something created by man and wielded by the "elite" to pacify those subordinate to them; to make them accept their fate.

This idea of "acceptance" of the camp situation as a "fate" dictated by the creation of a "new order of things" is one of the most important features used to support the philosophical views behind Borowski's concentration camp stories. He tried to show how the inmates, after being exposed to the atrocities committed in the camps, became immune to their psychological effects and began to look upon these happenings as normal events. Eventually, those who were in a position to, tried to create a semblance of civilization which would "fit" this situation -- a functional society with new norms. In fact, some of the most trivial activities became examples or evidence of their

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[48]Borowski, op. cit., p.80.
[49]ibid., p.82-83.

"civilized" or socialized state. For example:

> Budowaliśmy boisko wiosną i jeszcze przed jego skończeniem poczeliśmy siać pod oknami kwiatki i wykładać tłuczoną cegłą czerwone szlaczki naokoło bloków. Siało się szpinak i sałatę, słoneczniki i czosnek. Zakładało się trawniczki z wycinanej koło boiska murawy. Podlewało się to co dzień wodą przyniesioną beczkami z obozowej umywalni.
>
> Kiedy podlewane kwiatki podrosły, skończyliśmy boisko.
>
> Teraz kwiatki rosły same, chorzy sami leżeli w łóżkach, a myśmy grali w nożną.[50]

In this passage Borowski seemed also to be presenting an allegorical situation in which the world at war was like a new "playing field" being built by the Nazis. The people in the concentration camp were "planted" there just as the flowers and vegetables had been, they were "watered" and weeded "daily" by the starvation, death and disease in the camp. Finally, those who survived and became acclimatized by the time the field was completed, began to "grow" on their own, as if everything were perfectly normal -- even though there was a whole new "ball game" going on.

The narrator (Tadek) describes the events he sees, and takes part in, in an emotionless, matter-of-fact way. Any reaction to these events is manifested in a subconsciously triggered physical movement:

> Wróciłem z piłką i podałem na róg. Między jednym a drugim kornerem za moimi plecami zagazowano trzy tysiące ludzi. ... W ciepłe wieczory siadałem w drzwiach bloku i czytałem "Mon frere Ive" Pierra Loti -- a ludzie szli i szli -- tą i tamtą drogą. ... Byłem zupełnie spokojny, ale ciało buntowało się.[51]

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[50]Borowski, "Ludzie,którzy szli", *Utwory, t.2*, p.141.
[51]ibid., p.142-143.

Borowski carried this to the point where, even after the Americans had liberated the camps, he saw no change in the situation other than that the uniforms on the gaurds were different:

> -- Nothing sir. ... Nic się nie stało. Zastrzeliliście przed chwilą dziewczynę z obozu. ... -- My tu w Europie, jesteśmy do tego przyzwyczajeni -- odrzekłem obojętnie. -- Przez sześć lat strzelali do nas Niemcy, teraz strzelilizcie wy, co za różnica?[52]

Indeed, Borowski saw no fundamental difference between the people in the concentration camps, the Nazis and finally the Americans; they were all just people who believed in basically the same farcical concepts of culture, they all did what they had been led to believe was "normal" and "right". They even mourned their dead in the same way, offering the same prayers for their souls:

> Pod ścianą stały drewniane krzyże zaopatrzone w tabliczki i fotografie na emalii. Z fotografii patrzały proste, uczciwe, żołnierskie oczy, usta mężczyzn były ściągnięte z powaga, na piersiach czerniały żelazne krzyże, a na kołnierzach błyszczały srebrzyste naszywki SS. Napisy głosiły, że oto synowie i bracia i mężowie, i ojcowie polegli w dalekich stepach Rosji i w górach Jugosławii, i na pustyniach Afryki, i gdziekolwiek indziej, i że pamiętają ich, i aby Bóg dał im szczęśliwy, wiekuisty żywot.[53]

Essentially then, what Borowski was trying to say in his concentration camp stories was that everyone, all of society, by blindly believing in the "system" of civilization, was responsible for what had happened during the war, for the concentration camps, and even for Nazism.

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[52] Borowski, "Bitwa pod Grunwaldem", *Utwory, t.2*, p.205-206.
[53] Borowski, "Koniec Wojny", *Utwory, t.2*, p.284.

Borowski seemed to look upon the rise of Nazism as a type of "short circuit" in the system, but one which had also been "allowed for" by that system. Therefore, everyone, including himself, was in part guilty of the brutal crimes committed in the concentration camps.

It is this premise of everyones' mutual guilt, or responsibility, that made Borowski's concentration camp stories so different from contemporary literature. Even such works as Zofia Nałkowska's *Medaliony* [54], which are very similar to Borowski's stories in terms of the type of material (or situations) and the method of its presentation (primarily through dialogues), were written from the point of view that one specific group of people was responsible for the events being written about.[55] The same is true of Andrzejewski's story "Apel" in which he exposes, to a certain extent, the involvement of some of the prisoners in the brutal crimes committed against others, but, in turn, justifies their actions by saying (or implying) that they were forced into this behaviour by the Nazi camp authorities. Jerzy Putramant's story "Święto kulo" comes the closest to Borowski's concentration camp stories in terms of its philosophical statements. In this story Putrament attempts to expose the idea of the total devaluation of culture during the war. However, he seems to imply that only

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[54] Nałkowska, Zofia, "Medaliony" in *Pisma wybrane, t.2* (Warszawa:Czytelnik, 1956), p.397-440.

[55] The narrator (and author) was a member of the Chief Commission Investigating German Atrocities (*Główna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich*).

the Nazis were responsible for this.

Almost all the literary works being published immediately after the war, on a war-time topic, tended to point an accusing finger at a specific group of people, usually the Germans. No one wanted to place any of the responsibility for wartime events upon themselves or humanity in general -- no one except Borowski, and this is probably what provoked much of the negative criticism of his works. As M. Szpakowska observed:

> ... people are always more willing to listen to beautiful fairytales about themselves and are always more willing to tell such tales. It is easier to live when the evil which lies deep inside remains in a haze. And, it is easier to protest when someone blows away this haze, than to take -- upon oneself also -- responsibility.[56]

Although it may seem contradictory, Borowski's view that the world was a place where there was but one law: "might makes right" may be reconciled with his notion of "collective guilt". This is so if acceptance of this law ("might makes right") is taken to be universal, as it was by Borowski. If everyone accepts this notion, then struggle situations can arise and therefore elites. Also, in accepting this premise that "might makes right", people accept all of the paraphernalia or more subtle aspects which go along with it, namely: the modes of behaviour, social forms, ambitions and deflection (repression or sublimation) of anger. The guilt, then, which Borowski was talking about,

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[56] Szpakowska, M., "Kamienny świat pod kamiennym niebem", *Teksty*, 4(10), 1973, p.145. (trans. mine)

lay in the belief in, or acceptance of, this system -- a system which recognizes might and, therefore, divides society into powerful elites with the masses subordinate to them.

IV. Prose 1949-1951

The years 1949-1951 marked a period of intense Stalinization. Stalinist doctrine was imposed on all aspects of Polish life and the security police held the population in terror. For Polish literature this meant the strict enforcement of Socialist Realism as the official literary program.

This program was adopted in January, 1949 at the Szczecin Convention of the Union of Polish Writers. What it essentially meant was that Polish literature, from that time on, was to follow the Soviet model, with only a few modifications to suit the Polish situation.

Socialist realist literature was to be openly based on Marxist philosophy and the fight for socialism. Its purpose was to reflect present reality while also revealing a proper direction for the future. It was to express the point of view and the ideological orientation of the Party in a clear, straight forward manner so as to be understandable to the widest possible range of the population. The works were supposed to express a positive, optimistic attitude toward the world and provide an ideal example of socialist behaviour by way of the positive hero.[57] In short, the purpose of this literature was to instruct by means of positive examples, that is by means of the proper and good actions of the positive heroes, whose behaviour, it was

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[57] See: Hutnikiewicz, Artur, *Od czystej formy do literatury faktu* (Warszawa:Wiedza Powszechna, 1974), pp. 244-262.

assumed, people would emulate.

The program of Socialist Realism was enforced in Poland from 1949 to approximately 1954. For those five years many of Poland's best writers were silenced because they refused to succumb to this schematization of literature. Borowski, however was not silenced.

From 1949 until his death in 1951, Borowski devoted himself to the ardent promotion of the Socialist system. This man, who had seemed so noncommital, so lacking adherence to any particular political ideology, both during and immediately after the war, suddenly placed all of his faith in Marxism.

This however is not as bizarre or illogical as it may at first seem to be. If we carefully consider his concentration camp stories and the conclusions at which he arrived it becomes apparent that his final literary role was a logical development and perfectly in keeping with his philosophical position.

In his concentration camp stories Borowski rejected the entire pre-war European system of civilization -- a capitalist system. Throughout the stories he consistently exposed it as being pharisaical. He demonstrated that it was a system which recognized only might and therefore, allowed, if it did not provoke, conflict situations and the division of humanity into powerful elites with the masses subordinate to them. It was a system which had allowed the rise of fascism, the concentration camps and countless other

atrocities against human life.

While rejecting this system Borowski searched for another which could provide a viable alternative, and what could be more logical than his acceptence of Marxist ideology and the socialist system? Here was a system already coming to the fore, which would, in theory at least, eliminate the conflict situations of the pre-war system by totally eliminating the idea of elites and giving power to the masses. For Borowski, socialism seemed to offer a new hope for mankind. He saw it as a system, international in scope, which in theory could prevent another world war.

Once Borowski had, in his own mind, accepted the socialist system as the road to man's earthly salvation, it followed that he joined the Party (Polish Worker's Party) -- the official organization promoting this system. Also, in accordance with his fervid nature, he became actively involved in Party affairs. As Czesław Miłosz has stated:

> As a moralist, Borowski searched for an ideology strong enough to transform the world and to prevent a future release of bestiality in man. Skeptical as to Marxism during and immediately after the war, he later let himself be convinced by his friends, the "pimpled ones", and then, as befitted his fervent temperament, outdid them in his will to serve and be useful.[58]

By 1949 Borowski had become a prominent and very active member of the Party. He began to travel extensively, speaking at gatherings of all sorts and conscientiously spread the socialist "word". In his writing, he concentrated

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[58]Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature*, p.489.

more on publicistic work, producing scores of feuilletons, essays, editorials and commentaries -- almost all of which strictly adhere to the official Party line. As for short stories, he wrote only 17 of them after *Kamienny Świat* , most of which were published in 1950 and 1951.

These two major types of works (publicistic works and short stories proper) which Borowski produced in the last 2 1/2 years of his life shall be dealt with in separate sections of this chapter since they may be differentiated in terms of literary form and on the basis of aggressiveness of political slant. Borowski's publicistic works are far more aggressive in expressing their political message than are his short stories. This aggressiveness to the point where the articles may be called pure Party propoganda, is in turn closely related to the literary form. His short stories, on the other hand, were somewhat more reserved even though they usually fall under the heading of Socialist Realism.

A. Publicistic Works

Publicistic works such as feuilletons, essays and commentaries are, in a way, a hybrid form of literature. They contain elements of both artistic and non-artistic literary genres. The feuilleton, for example, is a publicistic form in which the author bases his work on actual facts or events (usually social or cultural in nature) and then describes and discusses them employing literary methods normally used in the writing of fictional

works (i.e. plot, scene description and character development).[59] Hence, the author can manipulate the facts in such a way as to present any particular view of the events he wishes -- and not necessarily the most objective one. This is exactly what Borowski did in his publicistic works; he presented the socialist, or more specifically, the Party view.

Borowski was so aggressive in presenting the Party "line" in his publicistic works, particularly those contained in the two volumes *Opowiadania z książek i gazet* and *Mała kronika wielkich spraw*, that most of these works have been labelled pure propaganda. This is particularly true of the first of these two volumes *Opowiadania z książek i gazet*, for which he won a national literary award. The entire volume seems to be one massive attack on the West, especially the United States. As Borowski, himself, wrote in one of the articles:

> Marzyłem, aby napisać książkę złożoną z opowiadan z gazet. ... Chciałem napisać książkę o szaleństwie świata kapitalistycznego , które przejawia się w sprawach wielkich i drobnych, w wierze w bombę atomową i Franka Sinatrę, w zachwycie nad demokracją amerykańska i różami Agi Khana, w oddaniu się ojczyznie i przedsiębiorcy, w miłości do Boga i do filmów w Hollywood, w imperializmie i pornografii.[60]

This type of attack on Western civilization was very much in line with Party policy, especially at this time during the Cold War. However, there was more to it than

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[59]See: Głowiński, Michał, et. al., *Zarys teorii literatury* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1975), pp.388-390.

[60]Borowski,T., "O czytaniu gazet", *Utwory, t.4* , p.90-91.

Borowski blindly following Party directives. It was, in a way, an intensified continuation of what he had started in his earlier prose, put to work for the Party.

In the concentration camp stories Borowski rejected the capitalist system and concentrated on primarily exposing it as the system which produced fascism. He attempted to show the Americans, who theoretically were to have crushed fascism, to be no different than the Nazis. However, at the time he had not yet accepted another system as a viable alternative. Once he had accepted socialism as the "road to salvation", he began promoting it in his publicistic works. This promotion, however, was based mainly on his more violent rejection of the capitalist system. He portrayed the whole of Western civilization as a continuation of the system which produced fascism and as an enemy threatening that which he saw as the answer to man's problems. Czesław Miłosz commented in *The Captive Mind*:

> Beta also could see a new and better order within his grasp. He believed in, and demanded, earthly salvation. He hated the enemies of human happiness and insisted that they must be destroyed.[61]

This hatred of the capitalist West was, in turn, very useful to the Party:

> Observing him carefully, the Party discovered in him a rare and precious treasure: true hatred.
>
> Beta was receptive. The more he read of Leninist-Stalinist theory, the more he convinced himself that this was exactly what he was looking for. His hatred was like a torrential river uselessly rushing ahead. What could be simpler than

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[61]Miłosz, Czesław, *The Captive Mind* (London: Mercury Books, 1962), p.133.

to set it to turning the Party's gristmills.[62]

Thus, Borowski became one of the Party's leading propagandists -- not so much because of external forces (stemming from the historico-political situation) but rather because of genuine personal beliefs which were, in a way, manipulated by them.

If we look at a few excerpts from Borowski's publicistic works we will find that, although they are definitely political articles, the political arguement is presented on the basis of moral issues. Borowski describes capitalist society as being war-mongering and morally depraved. For example, from the article "Nasz wiek XX":

> Za naszych ojców i naszego życia kapitalizm rozpętał dwie wojny imperialistyczne, znowu srożył się kryzys i głód, umierał Murzyn, Malajczyk i Hindus, potężniał faszyzm i szykowano mordownie narodom w krematoriach, lecz kapitalistyczne: moralność i prawo, religia i sztuka, nauka i wychowanie -- rozniecały nienawiść do kraju socjalizmu. Ich nawoływanie do pochodu zbrojnego przeciw Związkowi Rad rozniosło popiół ludzki po polach całej Europy.[63]

Another good example of this is the article "Rekord" in which Borowski tells the story of a young American commander (of a prison for Nazi war criminals) who wished to establish a world record in the sexual conquest of a woman prisoner who collected lamp shades made of human skin:

> Potem młody komendant był jedynym żyjącym człowiekiem, który tyle razy miał kobietę zbierającą abażury z ludzkiej skóry. Potem Frau Elza zaszła w ciazę, została zwolniona z więzienia i w niedługim

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[62] ibid., p.126-127.
[63] Borowski, *Utwory, t.4*, p.162-163.

czasie rekord Amerykanina upadł.[64]

In the article "Borowski albo dramat absolutyzmu moralnego"[65] Andrzej Mencwel explains the union of moral and political issues in Borowski's publicistic works by essentially saying that Borowski had divided the universe in two: that which was the moral ideal and the real historical world. He further stated that:

> Hence, the concrete, real world, always rich in conflicts of ideology and morality, intention and practise, politics and tactics, appears to be a simple transparent world of moral abstractions; it splits itself along the lines of moral poverty and moral wealth, and the only thing left to do for the holders of this wealth is the constant uncovering of the repulsive characteristics of moral poverty. In this manner his writing changes into a political and ideological crusade, presented as a moral crusade.[66]

In this crusade against capitalist moral depravity Borowski brings to mind an impassioned evangelist shouting from the pulpit at a revival meeting. The louder he shouted, the more he convinced himself of what he was saying; the more convinced he became, the more impassioned his shouting became, almost a frenzied scream, and at that point he began to lose all awareness of the audience before him. As Miłosz commented:

> The shapes of the world became simpler and simpler, until at last an individual tree, an individual man, lost all importance and he found himself not among palpable things, but among political concepts.[67]

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[64]Borowski, *Utwory, t.4*, p. 110.
[65]Mencwel, Andrzej, "Borowski albo dramat absolutyzmu moralnego", *Sprawa sensu* (Warszawa: PIW, 1971), pp.150-185.
[66]ibid., p.180-181.
[67] Miłosz, op. cit., p. 132.

Although many of Borowski's publicistic works from the years 1949-1951 were technically very well written and often insightful, they were, at a later date, all lumped together and "written off" as the ravings of just another political fanatic from the "time of mistakes". They are usually referred to as "the rest" of Borowski's works --"documents from a world which fortunately has passed".[68]

B. Short stories

The 17 short stories Borowski wrote after *Kamienny świat* are usually labelled as works of Socialist Realism. However, if they are read carefully one will discern, particularly in some of the stories, a certain tendency toward negative criticism as well as satirical elements. Both of these cast some doubt on the correctness of this literary label. Also, if we compare Borowski's short stories to his publicistic works from the same period, we will find (as was mentioned earlier) that they were not as aggressive in tone and political statement. Their focus was somewhat different as well. While the publicistic works focused on unmasking the moral depravity of the Western world, his short stories are more concerned with conflicts in specific settings within socialist society, usually in Poland.

It may at first glance seem incongruous for Borowski, an ardent promoter of the socialist system in his

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[68]Bartelski, Lesław, "Dzień jego śmierci", *W kręgu bliskich* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967), p.40.

publicistic works, to write short stories showing conflicts within the realm of the socialist system. I feel, however, that it is perfectly normal for a person to have both a strong faith in a higher system of "good" (in Borowski's case, Marxism) as well as the ability to recognize the weaknesses of man within this system and to expose them.

In these short stories Borowski stated his criticisms within the context of his faith in Marxism. Hence, the stories have a definite socialist slant. They are also "realistic". But whether they fully adhere to all the principles of Socialist Realism in accordance with the official program, is another matter. Looking at the basic principles of socialist realist literature we can see how Borowski's stories related to them.

Socialist realist literature was to be a positively oriented reflection of reality. It was also to present the Party point of view. Its main purpose, as was already mentioned, was to instruct the population by providing model examples of proper socialist behaviour (the positive hero).

Borowski's short stories, on the other hand, attempted to instruct by defining or delineating unacceptable and often hypocritical actions. They were therefore negatively oriented while still retaining a didactic quality essential to socialist realist literature.

This does not mean that in these works Borowski was merely lamenting the movement's failure to overcome or compensate for the weakness and fears of man. His

publicistic works from the same time attested to his lack of disillusionment with the socialist system. The stories however, may have hinted at his growing lack of faith in man's ability or desire to cooperatively harmonize his existence, that is to achieve complete and morally perfect integration into any system.

Borowski's short stories from this period did not paint a rosy picture of life in the socialist camp. He did not show the people happily working together, building and strengthening a socialist state (as did the majority of socialist realist works). Instead, he dwelled more on the opposition to the system, be it active opposition or a lack of active support. In the story "Zabawa z wódką" Borowski showed a group of Polish workers to be more interested in dancing and drinking than in developing socialist culture:

> Potem rozejrzał się po świetlicy i zapytał, czy ktoś na sali czytał książki znanego literata albo słyszał od kogoś drugiego jego nazwisko. Nikt nie czytał, nikt nie słyszał, wszyscy czekali co będzie dalej.[69]

In "Muzyka w Herzenburgu" he showed that remnants of fascist thought still existed in a seemingly quiet and pleasant East German town:

> I mówi się, że Hitler był zły; był za dobry, skoro tacy jeszcze żyją.[70]

And in stories such as "Kłopoty pani Doroty", "Dysputy księdza dobrodzieja" and "Marta zrobiła dobrze" Borowski presented accounts of active opposition to the system. These

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[69]Borowski, T., "Zabawa z wódką", *Utwory*, *t.5*, p.51.
[70]Borowski, "Muzyka w Herzenburgu", *Utwory*, *t.5*, p.87.

stories told of the corrupt and subversive deeds of people who were, in theory, working within the system and for the good of the people. An excellent example of this was presented in "Klopoty pani Doroty" which described the deeds of Mr. Stasinek:

> Oskarżony był działaczem związkowym. Politykiem. Wiedział dobrze, jakie ciążą na nim obowiązki. Zaufał mu lud, zawierzyło państwo. ... Ale kiedy inni zapracowali się na śmierć, żeby ruszył transport i przemysł, żeby dać ludziom chleba i mięsa, maszyn i ubrań, pan Stasinek czerpał chciwą łapą z kasy związku zawodowego. Zamaskowało; założył gniazdo kumoterskie w miasteczku, groził ludziom, że powyrzuca, powsadza, nauczy. Bali się go, patrzyli w milczeniu, jak rozkrada mienie państwowe.[71]

Despite his own faith in the socialist system, and his loyalty to the Party, Borowski simply could not embellish the facts. He had to present them the way he saw them even if they were not positively oriented. As Drewnowski stated:

> Despite his efforts, Borowski did not become a positive realist.[72]

In fact, when he did try to make positive statements or fit Party slogans into his works, the words came out as satirical or sarcastic remarks. For example:

> Pojawili się w miasteczku pierwsi PPR-owcy, przyszło wojsko polskie, zaczął działać Urzad Bezpieczeństwa -- i sielanka, dawno wymarzona sielanka wojenna prysła i nawet orzeł nie miał zuchowatej korony na głowie, ale za to czub zuchowato podczesał do tyłu jak czujny, młody chłopak z UB, który oczu nie zmruży, a Polski ustrzeze.[73]

and:

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[71]Borowski, "Kłopoty pani Doroty", *Utwory*, *t.5*, p.145.
[72]Drewnowski, T., op. cit., p.353.
[73]Borowski, *Utwory*, *t.5*, p.181.

> ..., a znad głów prezydium spoglądał na salę mądry, uśmiechnięty jakby z ironia --Wielki Lenin.[74]

If we compare Borowski's short stories from this period (1949-1951) to his other works we will find several common threads running through them. The first and most important of these is one of the major principles of his literary technique -- behaviourism. Throughout all his works, and particularly in his concentration camp stories, Borowski allowed the words and actions of the characters to speak for themselves. Rarely, if at all, did he include author's comments, preferring instead to use dialogues between characters. This feature is obviously present in his later stories, even though it appears as a remnant rather than a major creative principle.

The second feature these works have in common with his other works, particularly his concentration camp stories, is a certain negativism. Borowski continually seemed to dwell on the negative aspects of humanity, though not quite as severely in his later stories.

The third feature linking Borowski's works together is that all of his stories were based on actual facts and events. Borowski's literary ideal was a modern "literature of fact", [75] one in which the facts about man and his actions are presented as they really are and not as we would like them to be. Even fiction had to be a truthful reconstruction of reality. As Borowski himself wrote in one

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[74] ibid. , p.136.
[75] Drewnowski, op. cit., p.252.

of his poems:

> Jestem poetą, To znaczy nazywam
> rzeczy imieniem: na świat mówię -- świat,
> na kraj -- Ojczyzna, czasem mówie chmurnie
> na durniów -- durnie.[76]

And, this is what he struggled to do throughout his literary career.

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[76]Borowski, *Utwory*, *t.1*, p.188.

V. Conclusion

As a writer, Tadeusz Borowski was a moralist who spent most of his short life vainly searching for truth and a system which would assure moral perfection in the world. He accepted Marxist ideology in the hope that the socialist system would lead to this perfection and thereby, bring about peace in the world. In the end, however, he was disillusioned by man's apparent unwillingness or inability to achieve this.

Borowski began his literary career as a catastrophist. His early poems presented an ominous vision. However, they also revealed the basis of his search. They began to pose the question: "What is the true meaning of civilization and culture, and do they really exist?" His concentration camp stories clarify this question. They also reflect the conclusions at which he arrived after witnessing the catastrophe his poems predicted -- the Nazi concentration camps.

In his early prose works Borowski attempted to expose the heretofore commonly accepted premises of civilization and culture as being pharisaical. He tried to show that, in fact, there was only one law governing man in this system, namely -- "might makes right". He also proposed that everyone who blindly accepted this premise and all the things associated with it, was thereby responsible for the atrocities committed during the war.

In his search for an alternative to the system which he had rejected in his first two volumes of prose Borowski turned to Marxism. He accepted this ideology and the socialist system as a possible solution to the problems of the world. Socialism was for him the road to man's earthly salvation -- the road leading to the moral perfection which he demanded.

Borowski's publicistic works attested to his faith in the socialist system. In these works Borowski continually lashed out at the West which he perceived to be a continuation of the system he had rejected and an enemy of the socialist system -- the system which would save mankind.

The short stories Borowski wrote in the last two years of his life continued to reflect his faith in Marxism and the socialist system. However, they also seemed to hint at his growing disillusionment with man. These stories dwelled on the problems "with" or "of" people within the realm of socialism. It was as though Borowski was beginning to feel that man could never achieve a harmonious, morally perfect state -- not even within the socialist system.

Probably the best summary of Borowski's works was written by Czesław Miłosz. It reads as follows:

> In spite of its apparent contradictions, Borowski's works stands as a whole, unified by his chase after some unshakable moral values. The bitterness of his early poems grew out of his disagreement with the belief in the redeeming virtue of Polish heroism. His Auschwitz stories, seemingly written in cold blood, are actually a most hot-blooded protest. He embraced a dogmatic Marxism because of the same stubborn search, as he found in it a promise of

> rescue for mankind. And since he was a man of scrupulous integrity, he was doomed to fail in his new duty as a "politically reliable" writer.[77]

Tadeusz Borowski took his own life on July 1, 1951 and as with any suicide, it is impossible to say what actually caused him to commit such a desperate act. One can only speculate as to what the reasons were and puruse events (which may have affected his state of mind) as they took place in the last months of his life.

One of these events was Borowski's affair with another woman. He had also been given another secret political mission to carry out in Germany.[78] About this time (early 1951) there was also a growing concern that the Korean conflict would explode into World War III. Borowski may have even come to the conclusion that the Soviet Union, the leader of the Socialist cause, was just as war-mongering as he perceived the capitalist West to be in their involvement in Korea.

However, the final blow for Borowski was probably the arrest of his close friend, Czesław Mankiewicz, by the security police. Mankiewicz had been an officer in the People's Army during the war as well as a long time activist in the P.P.R.. Although Borowski tried to intercede on his behalf, his efforts proved fruitless. Borowski did not live to testify at Mankiewicz's trial. He committed suicide approximately two weeks after the arrest took place. Miłosz

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[77] Miłosz, Czesław, *The History of Polish Literature*, p.490.
[78] Kott, Jan. "Introduction", Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (Harmondsworth:Penguin Books Ltd.,1976) , p.21.

commented thusly about Borowski's suicide:

> His sudden suicide in July 1951 was a shock for all political and literary Warsaw. The reasons for that act were, as is usual in such cases, a tangle of many strands: an ideological crisis when he realized that he was an abettor of the terror came together with a personal drama of involvment with two women, and this, combined with what must have been a latent self-destructive urge, got hold of him at the moment of a weakened resistance. [79]

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[79] op.cit., p. 489-490.

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